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An Interview with Anne Ranasinghe on Aspects of Culture in Sri Lanka

Le Roy Robinson

Anne Ranasinghe is a journalist, short story and radio play writer, and poet. Some of her work has been translated into several languages-Sinhalese, Tamil, Dutch and Serbo-Croat; one book of her poems has been translated into German, her native language. She has won prizes for poems, short stories, a radio play and essays.

She was born Anneliese Katz in Essen, Germany, in 1925. She had her basic education in Essen, then entered the Jawne Gymnasium in Cologne in 1936. Caught up in Hitler’s persecution of the Jews, her parents sent her to England in 1939. Her parents were deported to the ghetto in Lodz, Poland in 1941, and were murdered in Auschwitz in 1944.

She completed her high school education at Parkstone Girls’ Grammar School in Dorset, England. When she graduated, World War II was at its height, so as war service she started nursing. She trained at Charing Cross Hospital and Kings College, Moorfields Eye Hospital, the Chelsea Hospital for Women, and the Burden Neurological Research Institute in Bristol.

In 1949 Anne Ranasinghe married Dr. Don Abraham Ranasinghe, who was pursuing post-graduate studies in England. He later became Professor and Head of the Department of Obstetrics and Gynecology of the Medical Faculty of the University of Colombo. On retirement he was honored as Professor Emeritus. In 1979 he was appointed Chancellor of the University of
Colombo and in 1980 was awarded the degree of Doctor of Science Honoris Causa. He died in March 1981.

Anne Ranasinghe, who joined her husband in Sri Lanka in 1951, became a citizen of Sri Lanka in 1956. She is the mother of seven children, three by her husband’s previous marriage and four by theirs.

She began her writing career in the late 1960s after obtaining a Diploma in Journalism at the Colombo Polytechnic.

For the last 15 years she has been working as Executive Secretary of the Amnesty International South Asia Publications Service in Colombo.*

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ROBINSON: Let’s pick up again with your short story “Desire”. Two foreign women tourists are killed by a fisherman at Marble Bay, Trincomalee. “Desire” seems to blame the victims more than the murderer. Is the story based on an actual incident? Does the ignorance of the tourists justify rape and murder?

RANASINGHE: Of course not. I am not sitting in judgement: I am relating, even warning. No, the story is not based on an actual incident. It has a number of ingredients. Firstly, as I said earlier, my own “unassimilated” feelings of unease at the strange, explicitly tropical, foreign setting, and my accumulated shame and, yes, disgust, when watching the shenanigans of some of the tourists who seemed totally insensitive to, or ignorant of, local traditions and taboos. And perhaps also my first realization of a kind of indifference to death which was totally alien in my experience, and which instilled well,

* This is the third part of an interview the first part of which appeared in Keizai Nenpo, Vol. 6, Spring 1990, and the second part in Keiei to Keizai, Vol.70, No.1, June 1990.
fear, I guess.

But I’d like to come back to the tourists. What I said nearly twenty years ago in “Desire” has, I think, even greater relevance today. The young people who come here from the West have a self-assurance which assumes that they know all the answers and can cope with every situation. The girls especially do not realize that some of the signals they give out can be misunderstood in a society as restrained as this. We have had several disasters, two of which did result in death, and both of which occurred recently. In one instance two girls on a beach at night became friendly with some fishermen, accepted invitations out of friendliness and had simply misunderstood the men’s intentions. After all, there is a language problem. In the other case an American woman known for her success in business and independence toured Sri Lanka alone, was traced to various beach resorts and upcountry hotels, then simply disappeared. The memory left behind by her, the impression she gave, apparently, was that she was forth-coming and out-going, and made friends easily. No clue as to her fate has been found.

ROBINSON: The setting in “Desire” is Trincomalee. The men — Muttiah specifically — are Tamils; why Tamils?

RANASINGHE: There was no sinister political motive behind that, if that’s what you’re suggesting. In the setting I had chosen, Sinhalese names would have been totally false. It’s true that in the good old days Sinhalese fishermen would migrate to the North East during the period of the South West Monsoon. But they had particular places for their temporary stay and usually did not take their women along. In this story the men had to be Tamils.

ROBINSON: Then what do you mean when you refer to your realization of “an indifference to death” in Sri Lanka?
RANASINGHE: I have been trying to clarify my own thoughts on this. I have discussed it recently with a European journalist who was horrified by the killings that are taking place here, and by the lack of outrage at these killings by the populace. Bodies floating down rivers or burning by the roadside are a spectacle that my cause a traffic jam. But, having satisfied their curiosity, people move on without apparently batting an eyelid. Of course, this is an extreme example. But on the whole death is accepted much more, shall I say, calmly? than in the West. I have come to the conclusion that probably the principles of Buddhism have become so inculcated that they have become part of the-how shall I put it?-the local psyche and have thus deeply influenced not only conscious reactions but also innate behavior.

ROBINSON: Well, let’s get back to your stories. Incidentally, “with words we write our lives”, the title of your book of short stories and poems. Why is there no capitalization? And what is the title trying to say?

RANASINGHE: “With words/ we write our lives/ Resurrect the dead and/ Reopen the lips/ Of their black night’s wound/ That the blood may not congeal”. These are lines from one of my poems. What is the title trying to say? Basically, that “writing”, using words, making poetry or short stories or whatever — CREATING with words — what this means to ME:

Words are the blood
Words are the flame
Words are the fragrance
Of the three colour tree
Words are the knife
That strips off the back
Words are the earth
That burns beneath my feet
Words are the spark
Igniting the dream
And words are the threshold
Between life and
Death.

As for the capitalization, a friend of mine, Edith Weeraratne, designed the cover, and that's how she felt it was right. I didn't see any reason to argue about it.

ROBINSON: Who is Edith Weeraratne?

RANASINGHE: Edith was a graphic artist before she took to writing. She joined the Shama workshop in the late sixties-organized by Stewart Wavell as part of training for writing for radio. He was here on a temporary assignment, lent by the B B C. Edith wrote a book of short stories called *Winged Visitor*, and emigrated with her family to Australia soon after. I have not heard from her for many years.

ROBINSON: There are 12 short stories in this book of 1972. Had you written others?

RANASINGHE: Yes, I had a whole lot that were published in various magazines, or read on radio, but when I put the book together I didn't really trust myself to include them all. Recently I came across the script of this one: it is called "In Transit". I am not quite sure but it may be the first short story I wrote, in approximately 1968. While I am very fond of it I am not sure whether it is successful or not. As I said, I can't judge. It was broadcast, and also used by some magazines. And I think the Radio Times reproduced it.*

ROBINSON: What do you mean when you say you don't "trust yourself" with regard to judging your stories?

* "In Transit" appears at the end of this interview. See Appendix I.
RANASINGHE: I am a very bad judge, and a diffident one, where my own work is concerned. That may sound strange from someone who is as opinionated as I am, and who has no difficulty in assessing other people's work. Maybe the reason is that the core of all my creative writing is based on actual experience, and although I add and subtract and embroider and often unsubtly try to disguise, when I write I am totally involved. How can I explain to you the joy and exhilaration of this experience? My desk and typewriter and room disappear and I live my story or poem or play. In order to get the full pleasure out of this I must first finish all my other office tasks, and so it is usually only late at night or on a weekend that I can get down to my own writing. I am at the moment reading Donald A. Praters' biography of Rainer Maria Rilke, the great German poet. It's called "Ein klingendes Glas"-a Ringing Glass-that is not a good translation. It's a quotation from Die Sonette an Orpheus. "Hier, unter Schwindenden, sei, im Reiche der Neige, sei ein klingendes Glas, das sich im Klang schonzerschlug"-"be like to a clear-ringing glass that fractured itself while still reverberating....." To my great surprise Rilke also had a "thing" about clearing his desk before starting on new work, and by "clearing his desk" he meant dealing with a voluminous correspondence. He used this letterwriting exercise as a sort of mental clearing house for ideas; but he also needed to be free from the obligation which a pile of letters represented so that he could fully and unimpeded throw himself into writing. I know that feeling exactly.

ROBINSON: You say you "unsubtly try to disguise". Would you give an example?

RANASINGHE: In my short story "The Funeral" there was a very slight central theme, but the gist of the exercise was to portray a series of characters and their varied reactions to the death: real grief, feigned
grief, pure hypocrisy, down-right boredom, and so on. I had "col­lected" my impressions from various funerals I had attended usually with my husband, and some of the conversations were almost ver­batim as overheard. But I thought I had erased the recognizable hallmarks of identity. Imagine my horror when one of my husband’s friends recognized himself and, fortunately, laughed the whole matter off; he was even a little flattered. Which was ironical because his "por­trait" was not particularly charming.

ROBINSON: I've read "The Funeral", but I won't ask you to identify the person. Then how does "actual experience" — yours — come into "After the Monsoon"? "Brief Happiness"? "The Black Box"?

RANASINGHE: "After the Monsoon" is based on the ceremonial aspect of a Sinhalese wedding, of a life cycle in the setting of a "landed" family. You will think me pretentious when I say that I wrote that little story more as a poem than as a story. I used my personal experience and supplemented it with that I had meanwhile gleaned from friends and relatives, and gave the tableau an upcountry landscape as back­ground.

ROBINSON: Are there any other stories you know of by local writers that deal with weddings and funerals?

RANASINGHE: I can't think of any stories. But poems, yes. Patrick Fernando's "Obsequies of the Late Antonio Pompirelli, Bishop", a marvellously ironical juxtaposition of the pomp and circumstance ac­companying the death of this servant of Christ, with the crucifixion: "No man ambiguous, unclassified/ Or unruly like the mob when He died...." And Yasmine Gooneratne's "Horoscope" which treats tradi­tional marriage no less ironically than Patrick does the death of the prelate:

    Rise for the bride, in whom all virtues blend,
nurtured these eighteen years towards this end
by watchful women folk, the same that hover
about her now; their duty to discover
budding self-will, to root it up, and tend
the shame-fast fear that gratifies a lover.

She draws upon her our admiring eyes,
her own correctly lowered now. A prize
duly annexed together with the dower
her father yields, and trusting in its power,
she dreams of happy hours, nor knows what lies
ticking relentlessly among her flowers.

ROBINSON: Did you yourself have a wedding like the one in your story?
RANASINGHE: I am afraid not. Ours was very utilitarian. My husband
was a post-graduate student and I had just finished my training as a
nurse, and neither of us had any money! In any case, I don't think I
would have had the courage and patience to go through the traditional
rituals. And we were in England, so the question did not arise.

You know, it is very difficult for an outsider, especially a non-
Asiatic, to understand the social set up in Sinhalese society, and
almost impossible to get an overall objective view when one is
precipitated right into the middle of the system and lacks essential
knowledge. One also tends to get caught up in family loyalties, and it
takes a long time to disentangle the strands that go to make up tradi-
tion and custom. It would be presumptuous of me to claim that I have
more than scraped the surface. But on the other hand, in day to day liv-
ing in a Sinhalese family it is impossible to remain unaware of the
caste system that still has some importance in certain areas. Especial-
ly that of marriage.
ROBINSON: What were the origins of caste among Sinhalese? Did it have anything to do with religion?

RANASINGHE: Its origins seem to be obscure, probably translated from India, with modifications, in the remote past. It was based on the belief that all people are not equal but differ from each other on the basis of occupational and ceremonial responsibilities. But, no, it had nothing to do with religion. It was entirely secular. And as caste is inherited by birth nothing whatever could change it.

ROBINSON: What would you say is the position of caste today? Basil Fernando says among Sinhalese caste is now largely psychological.

RANASINGHE: Well, today caste no longer has anything to do with the occupation one chooses, and it is difficult to find out what exactly it means in the modern context. But, it is also true to say that in many villages, especially the more remote ones, the lines between the various castes are still sharply drawn — in the areas of certain customs, homelife and marriage particularly. In the towns, caste importance is rapidly dwindling, because the hierarchy of wealth compensates for possible caste defects. Also, the intermingling of all groups at school and university level has broken down old barriers. So that many young people meet and mix and marry in increasing numbers according to personal choice and not within the framework of arranged marriages.

ROBINSON: But I've been told by Malika Jayasinghe the majority of marriages are still arranged.

RANASINGHE: I think that is so, that to a large extent they are still arranged. In this lies a degree of safety. The basis of Sinhalese society is the family, and the family is part of the larger caste relationship. Marriage is the most important of all social events and is a cementing of family ties on a basis of equality. To retain the so-called "purity" of the fami-
ly line it is essential not to step outside one's own caste. Personal choice is not completely ignored as in the old days but doesn't count that high. There is absolutely no comparison between the love affairs of the West which may culminate in marriage although the result of a purely casual encounter and this systematic examination of potential candidates.

ROBINSON: So little is left to chance?

RANASINGHE: You might say so. Horoscopes must agree on all important points. The social status of the two "candidates" should be approximately equal, and the casts should match. The dowry offered by the bride's family must be acceptable to the young man's father. And although it is desirable that the girl should be reasonably attractive and younger than the boy, a deficiency in beauty can be compensated for by a reasonable increase in dowry. Educational qualifications weigh in the girl's favor for they might help in supplementing family income. But some young men feel that girls become too independent and difficult to handle if they are educated, and they prefer the docile, more ignorant girl in order to preserve their male dominance!

ROBINSON: Would you say that your acceptance/rejection by Sri Lankan society was related to caste?

RANASINGHE: Being European I am caste-less, and so do not qualify as part of Sri Lankan society. Except as my husband's wife; and while a real down-to-earth discussion about the meaning and relevance of caste was never possible in our family (I guess feelings ran too high) I was given to understand that it is better to be European (casteless) than to be of low caste.

ROBINSON: What is your personal response to caste differences?

RANASINGHE: In the first place, most of the time I haven't a clue who belongs to what caste, and it simply doesn't figure. You have to be
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born and bred a Sinhalese (or Tamil-Tamils too have a very strong caste system) to be tuned in to that kind of artificial differentiation. It would be ludicrous if I had any kind of positive or negative feelings. The only feelings I do have are that the whole system or what is left of it should be abandoned quite deliberately. But I guess that won’t work, for, as Basil says, psychological reasons. So we will have to wait for time to accomplish it. Fifty years. A hundred.

ROBINSON: Let’s go back to arranging a marriage. A friend or relative indicates that there is a young man who is interested in the daughter of a family. What happens?

RANASINGHE: Well, a marriage broker might make the first approach. They are usually very interesting characters. They have dealt with the same family for years. They know everything about the background from childhood illnesses to skeletons in the cupboard. But, of course, from a business point of view, only the virtues of a potential candidate are extolled. We listen to the lengthy recital and, however tempting the offer, feign complete unconcern! The horoscope belonging to the young man is now handed over, and we take it to our astrologer so that it may be compared with that of our daughter. That is, of course, only if we decide the young man is eligible!

ROBINSON: So let’s assume the horoscopes agree. What then?

RANASINGHE: The next step is for the young man’s people to send both the horoscopes to their astrologer. For verification. Because, who knows but we might have cheated? And if all parties are satisfied the young man has to meet his prospective father-in-law.

ROBINSON: How often does a young man usually find the “right” young woman? At a first or second attempt?

RANASINGHE: He or she would be very lucky if that were to happen.
Sometimes this procedure has to be re-enacted as often as fifteen or twenty times. A sort of tea party is arranged. The young man arrives with his father or brother. And at a certain point the girl is brought in. In “enlightened” circles she may sit down and chat a while. Or, after a few minutes, she is sent away. Sooner or later the guests depart. If the young man likes the look of the girl and we don’t disapprove of the young man, we indicate that we would like to return the call. And when we do this, in a small way the “real” discussion begins, the main point at issue being questions of dowry. And, if there are no snags, a date is fixed for the engagement.

ROBINSON: Any special considerations there?

RANASINGHE: Why, of course. The date is decided upon by astrological computation too. It takes place at the girl’s place. It’s far more binding than a Western engagement where a couple simple and privately may decide to exchange rings which can be returned at a moment’s notice and the engagement thereby cancelled. Here the whole family is involved and an engagement is not quite but almost as binding as a marriage.

On the day of the engagement the house is in a flutter of excitement. The girl is dressed up. The young man arrives at the astrologically correct moment accompanied by his nearest relations. And that can be quite a crowd. Also at the astorologically correct moment the girl comes out to meet the young man, and there, before the assembled families, they exchange rings, and usually he places a chain around her neck. Notice of marriage is given. A friend reads out the specifications for the wedding. Flowery speeches are made by elderly gentlemen from both sides in praise of everybody. Finally half the agreed upon dowry is handed to the young man, who hands it to his father, and he sets to and counts it. All being in order, the father
hands it back to the girl for safe keeping. This is considered good form. To put it in one’s pocket and walk off with it would involve a terrible loss of face for the young man’s people.

ROBINSON: And when is the wedding?

RANASINGHE: It has to take place within three months. All the usual hassle of wedding preparations: clothes for the girl, jewelry, a place to hold the wedding, food, flowers, invitations for guests. The bride’s father pays for the wedding so he takes two thirds of the invitations.

ROBINSON: What happens when the great day arrives?

RANASINGHE: The hall has to be decorated and a poruwa set up. A poruwa is a slightly raised platform with a canopy — reminiscent of the Jewish Chuppah. It is usually decorated with white flowers, possibly with lights. On the floor, under a white cloth, raw rice is sprinkled, signifying prosperity, and four shining brass pots filled with coconut flowers are placed at each corner with oil lamps between. Fertility symbols. A white cloth is also spread for the bridegroom to walk on as he arrives. Traditionally the bride’s eldest brother washes the groom’s feet in a basin of water, or today he might just wipe the shoes. In return for this service he receive a ring. The groom now walks up to the poruwa, meets the exquisitely dressed bride, and at the correct time (astrologically, of course) both step onto the poruwa. The bridegroom ties white cloth around the bride’s waist as a symbol of purity, and places a blouse around her shoulders. By this he signifies his obligation to clothe her from this day forward. The left thumb of the groom is tied to the right thumb of the bride, and the uncle or father who performs the ceremony pours water slowly over the joined hands. Young girls dressed in white sing benedictory verses. Then an old uncle recites a blessing. And now betel is handed from the bridegroom to the bride and then to any relations that come
forward. This is a poignant moment. The giving of the betel leaves represents leave taking from her parents, and the bride realizes the finality of the meaning of the day. As they step off the poruwa a coconut is split and examined to ascertain whether the two halves have fallen in an auspicious way. The register is signed, a Western style cake is cut, and the remainder of the dowry is handed over. Now everybody eats, drinks and makes merry. The couple leaves at the astrologically predetermined time, and in the olden days the groom would take his bride to his father's house to consummate the marriage. Rituals confirming the bride's virginity would follow in the morning. But today most couples go away for their honeymoon.

ROBINSON: How about the economics of all these rituals and ceremonies?

RANASINGHE: The truth is that especially today weddings, financially and funerals too, but especially weddings, can be absolutely crippling. People get into debt and bankruptcy over them. The reason is twofold, I think. Firstly, there are these false values, people believe they are judged by their wealth, and here is an occasion to demonstrate it. And secondly weddings are an important social function. People who have even the remotest claim expect to be invited, and you can be sure that anyone who is left out, deliberately or accidentally, will harbour a deep grievance to the end of his life.

ROBINSON: How many people did you invite for your step daughter's wedding?

RANASINGHE: About a thousand. But there was a special reason: the bridegroom's father had been the President of the Senate and had a vast number of obligations where invitations were concerned. And my husband as professor and doctor, and member of a large clan of relations, had his own problems with invitations.

ROBINSON: The horoscope seems to play an important part in this
business of making a marriage. How did you react, for instance, where your children were concerned?

RANASINGHE: I simply cannot bring myself to believe in these astrological predictions. And all the effort that goes into finding the auspicious times... But the point is, that the society I had married into, the family that I had married into, was under the influence of people who took all this very seriously, and their lives were guided accordingly. It was not for me to change this; every misfortune, every illness would have landed on my doorstep had I tried to. And when your children marry there is the family of the partner too to be considered...

ROBINSON: After this informative diversion, let's get back to my earlier question. How does actual experience come into the other two of your stories I mentioned—both about death—“Brief Happiness” and “The Black Box”?

RANASINGHE: “Brief Happiness” is a true story, only very slightly altered. The young couple were my cousin and his lovely wife, both of whom I was very fond of. They married when I was about 13, and she died when I was 19. It was wartime England. I had started nursing and was fully aware of the prognosis when I first knew that she had melanoma. The little boy who does not cease to wait for the return of his dead mother is now a grown man with his own family. “Brief Happiness” was originally written for radio, by the by, and was broadcast by the Sri Lanka Broadcasting Corporation. It was also translated into Sinhala by Sumana Sapramadu and published in “Taruni”.

As for “Black Box”, it is absolutely authentic. I am the old lady who remembers a Christmas Eve many years before and dies in her sleep, and the characters in it are my family. I wrote this 20 years ago, but it’s amazing how my life has echoed this story. It is possible that death will too. The black box really existed. It was the most exciting
present I had ever had, and I have never wanted anything so desperately before or since. And it was only a cardboard box containing black letters of the alphabet with which one made words on a small white cardboard ledge which was fixed to the lid of the box. "With words we write our lives..." "The Black Box" was originally published in *Hemisphere*. And there was an exciting corollary: Joan Sutherland, the great Australian soprano, responded to the story in a letter to Russel Henderson, the then editor, who forwarded the letter to me. I was of course absolutely delighted.

ROBINSON: It's a shame that *Hemisphere* stopped publication. But, tell me. Why are you so obsessed with death? It figures in so much of your writing that I have read.

RANASINGHE: I don't think I'm any more obsessed with death than with love — and aren't these the two predominant themes of our lives? And I might also say that death has in a sense been ever-present in my life. First in Hitler's Germany, then during the war in England; later when I learnt of the loss of all my family. And my husband fell ill and was unwell off and on for the last ten years or so of our marriage. And now I myself am getting to that point in life when death becomes a reality...

ROBINSON: You mentioned earlier that you were worried, uneasy with regard to the different approach to the acceptance of death in Sri Lanka as compared to your experience in the West. Why do you think this has something to do with the practice of Buddhism?

RANASINGHE: There is a parable of the Buddha. A distraught mother came to him because her child had died and she wanted him to bring the child back to life. He said: "Yes, I can renew her life, but there is a medicine you must use as I direct. Go now and find some mustard seed from a house in which there has been no death". Realizing the im-
possibility of this the mother accepted the inevitability of death.

When my husband died he was cremated in the local cemetery. There was a very large gathering of friends and colleagues. And, as is customary, once the rituals are over and the body is committed, everyone commiserates with members of the family. I had been able to control myself until this moment, when somehow the full meaning, the final total absence that death is, impinged upon me. I broke down totally and looked for some support, more mental than physical, something that spelt out hope rather than this total despair. There were several Buddhist priests there who had performed the usual rites and chantings. One of them was well known to me. He had frequently visited my husband. I turned to him for help. But he rejected my anguish with a coldness that I have never forgotten — or forgiven. But it served its purpose: I pulled myself together and managed to go through the rest of the politenesses.

ROBINSON: In Sri Lanka are Buddhists always cremated?

RANASINGHE: I believe that in the villages where there is great poverty the dead are huried. But whoever can afford to cremates the dead. In the larger towns you have crematoria, but in the villages a wood-pyre is constructed, the body placed within it, and the fire is lit by the nephews or sons-in-law of the deceased. If none are available other relations will take on the task.

ROBINSON: What are other rituals and ceremonies connected with death among Sinhalese?

RANASINGHE: On the seventh day after death a Daane or almsgiving ceremony is held to provide merit for the deceased and to rid the house of his spiritual presence. Food is prepared in vast amounts, usually the dishes the deceased liked to eat. Priests are invited and conducted home ceremoniously. And relatives and friends join in.
There is a recitation of the five precepts and then the priests begin to feast, served by everyone with the best that is available. After they have eaten, the priests begin their preaching. In the final ceremony the close relatives pour water from a jug, which they hold jointly, into a basin until it overflows, signifying that thus merit should be gained by the person who has died. The priests are then presented with gifts such as an umbrella, a robe, or maybe a towel. A priest is not expected to have any other possessions except a begging bowl. Then the rest of the company sets to and has a good meal. It’s interesting that it’s only in the crisis of death that Buddhist priests function as priests. Birth and marriage and the attainment of puberty among girls are surrounded with ritual of a supernaturalistic nature. But Buddhism has no part in them.

ROBINSON: To come back to your writing again, do you prefer writing poetry or short stories?

RANASINGHE: It’s not really a question of preferring. I love to write, and as long as I have a topic that engages me totally it doesn’t matter what I am writing. For me there’s a great similarity in writing poems and short stories insofar as both are limited and must be complete in themselves when you have finished. That basically means the poem should be so that not a word is out of place or false, that as far as you are concerned the stresses and rhythms and rhymes are final and unalterable. In a poem sometimes, as a great gift, the whole thing comes almost in one piece and you hardly have to alter anything. Sometimes you labor off and on for years before you achieve that blessed stage of peace. And it’s strange, but you can’t cheat yourself. Occasionally you’re sick to death of a particular line that just won’t come right, and you think “I bet no one will even notice, I’ll just leave it”. But you are compelled somehow to go back to it ad nauseam till it
ROBINSON: Can you specifically remember in which of your poems this really happened?

RANASINGHE: Oh, yes. You know when women have babies they remember until their dying day the details of each labor. Particularly the more unpleasant ones. It’s the same with me with each poem — and I’ve written I think nearly 150. Two examples. One of my first poems, “I Had Expected Tears”, was written in my head in the car while I was driving myself back from the airport where I’d seen my nine year old daughter off to a swimming meet. As soon as I got home I sat down and transferred the poem to paper. It hardly needed any adjustment. And it won a first prize in an international competition. On the other hand, a poem I began after I found the grave of my paternal grandparents on a lonely hillside overlooking their ancestral village in Germany (they were the only members of my family who had the privilege of a grave; everybody else died an unnatural death in Hitler’s concentration camps) I worked on for ages, putting it away, giving it up as a bad job, but not able to leave it alone either. After about two years it seemed OK to me. It’s very dear to me. Perhaps because of the effort. Like a difficult child.

ROBINSON: Which international contest did your poem “I Had Expected Tears” win? And let’s have the poem.

RANASINGHE: A yearly competition sponsored by Triton College in the U.S.A — in Illinois. Here’s the poem.

I had expected tears; brimful of tenderness
I ached to comfort her. Outside
Beyond the wall of glass the tarmac quivered
In mid-day heat; inside, the air-conditioned poise
Of svelte women sleek in simple suits
From Paris, Rome or London; and their men
Lounging-well manicured-in futuristic chairs
Sipping their whiskey on the rocks. But as I said
I had expected tears-first time alone from home
And Singapore is far away from here.

Her little face was taut. She did not speak.
I touched her hair and thought she is too small
At nine to travel by herself. And then the voice
Said time to go-the glass door swinging wide,
I heard the engine start; and all my love
Was clotted in my mouth. I kissed her hard.

She only smiled, and with an easy gait
Walked through the door into the blazing noon.
Then bursting into laughter ran across
The tarmac-faster, faster-till she reached
The gangway... bounding up the steps
And without turning once she flung into the plane.
She had by far outstripped the rest who walking slowly
Turned round to wave, and turned and waved again.

And watching her break loose from all the bonds
And willing her to stop-please only once,
To turn and wave to me-I swallow down my tears.
Sadly I wonder at her nonchalance
Not knowing this our failure or success.
ROBINSON: You composed this poem spontaneously, you say. But isn't there a big difference in the way you approach the writing of a short story?

RANASINGHE: Yes. First of all there must be a reason why you want to make your "idea" into a story. I mull it over, playing with the theme, identifying with the characters, creating a setting. I must have the beginning and end clear in my mind. I must "see" the whole thing, feel it and know it. Only then can I start to put it on paper. And that's where the problem begins. Because a short story is so much longer than a poem, however short it is, and yet you must approach it in the same spirit. It must have no excess verbiage, the "rhythms" must be right, it must flow smoothly, and at the end you'd like it to be so that it needs no changes. But that is much more difficult with a short story, and you can fool about with it for years before you feel content.

ROBINSON: When did you actually start writing? What made you start?

RANASINGHE: My very first effort was surprisingly ambitious. I was about ten years old, a pupil in the Jewish Elementary School in Essen. The festival of Purim was not far away, and we had been learning about Queen Esther and King Ahasverus, Haman and Mordecai. Do you know the story? Briefly, King Ahasverus, who ruled from India to Ethiopia over 127 provinces, had disposed of his wife Vasthi because she refused to show herself at a party the King was giving for his princes and servants. He issued a decree that all the fair young virgins in the provinces should be sent to his palace in Shushan so that he could choose a new wife. Now in the palace there lived Mordecai, a Jew, whose forebears had been carried away from Jerusalem by Nebuchadnezzar, the King of Babylon, and he had a niece Esther whom he had brought up as she was an orphan. She was very attractive and so she too was taken to the King; and he chose her as his wife.
The King was not aware that she was Jewish. Mordecai, who seemed to know his way around the palace, one day discovered a plot against the King. He told Esther, and she informed the King, and also gave the name of Mordecai as informant. When subsequently there was a dispute between Haman and Mordecai—Mordecai had refused to pay reverence to Haman who had been made the chief courtier—Haman decided not only to kill Mordecai but all the Jews in the kingdom of Ahasverus. Esther reveals Haman’s perfidy to the King, and through her good offices the Jews are saved. Esther has ever since been considered the saviour—(saviouress?)—of that Jewish community. The story fired my imagination and kindled my religious fervour. It also happened to be particularly apt as Hitler was already in power and creating difficulties for us, and he could easily be identified with Haman. That Haman was destroyed at the end of the story seemed a good omen. I wrote a play. In verse. It rhymed too. In German. And, if you don’t believe me, when I left for England to stay with an aunt who didn’t know me, my mother typed out this play and sent it to her. No doubt to impress her with this prodigy who was about to descend upon her. My aunt gave it to me many years later. And I gave it to the archive in the Synagogue in Essen where they collect all manner of memorabilia.

ROBINSON: Was your Purim play performed?

RANASINGHE: Yes, it was. I had a young and very interested class teacher who decided to perform it. She helped me knock it into shape. And then we selected the cast. I still have a photograph that I can show you. I, of course, am Esther, resplendent in my mother’s nightgown, towering, as you can see, over King Ahasverus and Haman and Mordecai as well as other, minor characters. We gave three performances in the hall of the new Jugendheim (House for Young People) to an audience of parents, teachers, relations and
fellow pupils. What I remember best is that I got a huge bunch of tulips at the end, and my father was upset that I did not include the rest of the cast in the applause. I couldn't. My arms were too full of flowers.

ROBINSON: What does Purim mean? What is its function?

RANASINGHE: Pur means "lot". That is, Haman had cast a lot against the Jews to destroy them. Purim is the plural: lots. The festival is kept joyously to remember the occasion.

ROBINSON: And have you been writing ever since?

RANASINGHE: By no means. Soon after the play I left this school in Essen and went to Cologne to the only Jewish Gymnasium left at that time. Then to England — and a new language. I had no chance to speak German for many years, so I lost it. English gained the upper hand. And by the time I had been in England a couple of years or so I started writing very adolescent poems in English. My hostess read a woman's weekly. I sent one in, and they published it. My first success. The poem was biblical, about the creation of the world.* This was during the second world war. Then I started nursing, and all thoughts of writing were driven out of the window. Those days nursing was really hard. We worked 12 hours a day with 3 hours off in between, and had one free day a month. On night duty you worked 12 hours with no time off except lunch at midnight. You did 3 months of this and then got 4 days leave. Somehow you had to find enough energy for lectures and study.

ROBINSON: Then when did you start to write again?

RANASINGHE: Well, after several years of this hard schedule I qualified as a nurse, met my husband, married him, and ultimately followed

* "Creation" appears at the end of this interview. See Appendix II.
him to Sri Lanka, where a premanufactured family awaited me, to which I also added. Again no time for writing. Till the youngest child was about 8 and I began to think in terms of what I was going to do with myself when all the children were grown and had left home. It was then that I decided to try myself — again — at — writing. To the horror of my family I decided to attend the local Polytechnic.

ROBINSON: Why horror?

RANASINGHE: The children felt it was infra dig for their mother to start going to school again, along with much younger students. They also hadn't much of an opinion of my ability to write. So they were frightened I'd disgrace them. One had after all to sit for examinations. Did I really think I could pass them, being well over 40? My husband was upset because the classes were daily in the evening and interfered with our social life. But surprisingly I held out.

ROBINSON: Was your husband's attitude about going back to school typical of Sri Lankan men?

RANASINGHE: I haven't discussed the point but I am sure it would have been echoed by all the friends of his generation. Actually I loved going back to the ink-splotted desks and that peculiar classroom smell. There were no problems of any sort. I was probably the oldest student, but that just didn't figure. We had a lot of fun and I learnt a lot.

ROBINSON: What kind of classes did you take at the Polytechnic?

RANASINGHE: News reporting. The law of defamation. Novel writing. Practical journalism. Short story writing. The Polytechnic journalism section had a nice logo on their stationery: a hand holding a pen inside a heart! With the slogan “with heart and hand”.

ROBINSON: I presume you passed the final examination?

RANASINGHE: Of course. Brilliantly! And I began to wonder what I would study next. But by that time my husband said I had to choose:
either him or the Polytechnic. I gave it a lot of thought and in the end chose him!

ROBINSON: Earlier you mentioned finding the grave of your grandparents in Germany? Why did you go back there?

RANASINGHE: I really never intended to. After the war, when the horrors perpetrated by the Nazi régime slowly became known even in far away Sri Lanka, I learnt that none of my family had survived. It seemed at the time impossible to find out details from here. In the meanwhile I had started writing. Inevitably a great deal of what I wrote circled round the Holocaust. Several of my poems were published. In Israel, America, here. And a short story of mine dealing with the Holocaust, “A Women and Her God”, was published in the *Jerusalem Post*. My home town in Germany, Essen, began to develop a conscience about its surviving ex-Essen Jewish citizens. They started to plan the restoration of the magnificent synagogue which had been burnt by the Nazis in November 1938 — to create a memorial, a place where archives could be kept, exhibitions shown, the younger generations taught about the evils of the Hitler period. So the town administration began to trace survivors. Including me. They wanted to publish my Holocaust poems both in English and German as part of the memorial project. I thought — after dithering for two years — that this was worthwhile. And I went back to finalize it. In November 1983. After 44 years. I dedicated the booklet “to my parents and all the Jews from Essen who were murdered by the Nazis” — in those words.

ROBINSON: Was anything about the Holocaust known in Sri Lanka?

What did Lankans think of your writing on it?

RANASINGHE: Hardly anything. The European war barely touched Sri Lanka, there were a couple of air raids and it was the transit point for
troops of the Allied Forces who were fighting in the East; Lord Mountbatten had his headquarters here. My writing was read politely, even compassionately, but not really with understanding. Until 1983. When we had our own Holocaust in Sri Lanka. That changed many things. Unavoidably. 1983 is a landmark, a watershed. The status quo ante can never again be achieved in Sri Lanka.

ROBINSON: Your return to Germany after 44 years could be quite a story in itself.

RANASINGHE: Yes. It is. To cut a long one short — the poems were published, and there was a surprising response to them. Juan Allende-Blin, an ex-Chilean composer living in Essen, wanted to make a "Horspiel" using my poems and my voice. He was appalled by my inadequate German. He called the one hour composition "Mutter sprachlos" (Without Mother Tongue). This was performed and broadcast. Then I was approached by Frank Herdemerten, a drama teacher who worked with a group of students. They took a year to create what they called a Scenic Collage based on my poems and relevant texts and called it "Ein Feuerwerk aus zerbrochenem Glass" (A Fireworks of Broken Glass). A quotation from one of my poems. This was first performed in the Synagogue in Essen. Then they toured various towns. It ultimately won prizes for them. And then followed Michael Lentz's film "Heimsuchung" (VISITATION) in which he uses my story. The subtitle of the film, "Anne Ranasinghe's Confrontation with the Germans", encapsulates the objective of the film. The first half of the film was shot in Essen. The second part records my return to my father's small village in Hessen (and that is where I found the grave of my grandparents) and my meeting with the villagers whom I had known as a child. They were present when my grandparents' home was attacked during the so-called Night of the Broken
Glass in November 1938. The last part of the film was made here in Sri Lanka by Lester James Pieris.

ROBINSON: What was your impression of film making?

RANASINGHE: Well, it was a completely new experience for me. Michael Lentz gave us no script. We knew when the filming started, where we had to begin, and where to end, but what came in between had to be improvised simply from points enumerated beforehand—a great exercise in concentration. Lester James Pieris brought his film team to my house. We had a most exciting time moving from office to bedroom to dining room, and then we went out to the Pettah, the bazaar district, and finally to the beach near Mount Lavinia, where the sun just failed to oblige with one of its fabulous descendings into the sea, as grand finale. Everybody was wonderfully patient in spite of the heat and tightness of space, and, of course, inexperience. But on the whole I enjoyed it very much. Lester is, of course, the doyen of Sri Lankan film makers.

ROBINSON: Was the film ever shown in Sri Lanka?

RANASINGHE: Yes. First it was on German TV. It's being used by schools and universities in Germany for instructional purposes. Here the German Cultural Institute has shown it. Incidentally, all this work necessitated a number of visits to Germany, and in the course of time my German did improve. But it's almost impossible to span the gap of nearly half a century language-wise. And so I end up speaking no language properly, a jack of all trades and a master of none.

ROBINSON: Do you experience this as a hardship?

RANASINGHE: Let me put it this way. I already mentioned the gut feeling that comes with the mother tongue. However competently one learns a new language it can never give one that deep inner experience of the mother tongue. It's perhaps partially a question of association.
However fluent I am in English I have no "relationship" to the language in the way I have a relationship to my scrappy German. And because my German is so scrappy I can't write in it. But words in German have a meaning and feeling and association which perhaps date back to early childhood, and nothing can change that. For instance, let's take a simple word, "Erdbeere". This is the German word for strawberry. When I think Erdbeere I see it and feel its texture on my tongue and taste it. But there's a dimension beyond that, perhaps the dimension of association, perhaps earliest memories of circumstances under which I picked them or ate them, which lend a special luscious quality to Erdbeere, which "strawberry" won't achieve in a thousand years. And that goes for so many words. I think this is of vital importance to writing poetry. The two little poems I have written in German (the grammar was corrected by a friend) have for this reason given me very special pleasure.

ROBINSON: What happens when you hear the Sinhala word for strawberry?

RANASINGHE: There isn't one. The strawberry is an import, a recent one, and now for the first time it's being grown successfully up country here by Japanese for export purposes.

ROBINSON: Are there any Sinhala words to which you have a "relationship"?

RANASINGHE: Absolutely none. That is MY fault, not that of the language...

ROBINSON: A large number of well known writers — Kafka, Conrad, Koestler — wrote in their second languages.

RANASINGHE: Sure. It's not a question of competence. I would call it, well, I experience it as — how to express it-as the ultimate intimacy with one's work, a feeling that the words one has used have precisely
and completely the connotations one wishes them to have, physically, environmentally, emotionally. I have just completed reading E. F. C. Ludowyk’s *Those Long Afternoons*, his recollections of a boyhood in colonial Ceylon. He too makes a comment which I find almost strange. He cites a few Sinhala words and explains how evocative these words are for him. But Ludowyk was a Dutch Burgher. So Sinhala would not have been his first language.

ROBINSON: What did you think of Ludowyk’s book? Shelagh Goonewardena has told me about his importance in English language theatre in Sri Lanka.

RANASINGHE: I was surprised. I didn’t know Ludowyk, but his reputation is so great here that, well, I expected something quite different. The book is light as a feather, easy reading, of interest to me because I lap up all information about Sri Lanka before my time, and he writes about Galle during the first world war. But the book lacks the wit, and fantasy of Michael Ondaatje’s *Running in the Family* or of Punyakante Wijenaike’s insights in her *Way of Life* which are also insights into an upper middle class society. Also *Those Long Afternoons* has a somewhat superficial approach compared with, say, Yasmine Gooneratne’s masterly compilation of the annals of the Bandaranaike family, *Relative Merits*, of which she is a member. *Those Long Afternoon* leaves one vaguely dissatisfied, waiting to the very end for the great revelation which however does not come. Anyway, the importance of language should never be underestimated. Take Sri Lanka. That ill-considered decision in 1956 to make Sinhala the National Language — in 24 hours: — has had the most far-reaching, the most appalling effects. One could say that many of the dreadful events of the last 34 years could have resulted from this decision. What a cost in damage to property, ruined and destroyed lives, blood, and terror
among all the communities in the island. It brought to the surface all the latent animosities, initiated the Eelam issue, divided the population along ethnic lines from the schools upwards.

*****

Appendix I

In Transit

Mrs. Simpson-Kerr carefully carved up the pineapple on her plate, speared a piece onto her fork and lifted it to her mouth. But instead of inserting it she replaced it on her plate. Her heavily made-up lips stretched into a smile as a young man approached the table. Actually he was on his way to the other side of the already half-filled dining-room, but Mrs. Simpson-Kerr’s smile presented a formidable barrier.

He bowed slightly and said: “Good evening.”

“Good evening, Dr. Soames. Good evening.” Her plump white hands with their long red nails fluttered. She wore two large rings, one on top of the other.

“Well, have you settled in your room? Does it face the sea? ... This is a beautiful place, don’t you think?”

Margaret Simpson-Kerr sitting opposite her mother blushed scarlet. Why did she have to gush so, she was so... so obvious. She pretended to examine the room, trying to ignore her mother’s conversation.

Dr. Soames’ smile was polite. “Indeed yes. I have a lovely view. And you?”

Mrs. Simpson-Kerr did not answer the question. Instead she said: “Why don’t you sit with us? We would be delighted, wouldn’t we, Margaret?” She patted the table indicating where he was to sit. “Waiter. Waiter-another plate please, for this gentleman....”

There was no escape without snubbing her, and somehow Mrs Simp-
son-Kerr was not the kind of woman to whom one could be rude. In her late fifties, but well preserved... preserved is the word, thought Peter Soames as he glanced at her powdered face with the little tell-tale suture lines under the eyes, hallmark of a face-lifting operation. Her grey coiffure was carefully tinted with blue and so well lacquered that in spite of the whirring fans not a hair was out of place. She wore a black chenille frock cut rather low over her full bosom, and round her neck a magnificent string of pearls.

They had been fellow passengers on the plane from Europe but had not introduced themselves till they met at the foot of the Pyramids on one of their stop-overs. The Pyramids had been a wonderful opening gambit, and thereafter Mrs Simpson-Kerr had tried to adopt the young man. She had confided that she and her daughter were on their way to the exotic East to escape the English winter, that she was sick of the Cote d'Azur and the Canary Islands, of the crowded Italian beaches and Apres-Ski in Switzerland. So they had decided to try Sri Lanka for a change.

And he, where was he travelling?

Dr. Soames explained that he was on his way to Bangkok, that he was hoping to visit Angkor Wat.

He is not very forth-coming, thought Mrs Simpson-Kerr, looking at him across the table. But very handsome, almost distinguished, though still too young. Thirty-five maybe. His light-weight suit was an elegant shade of dark-grey worn with a plain white shirt and a wine-coloured tie. She purred slightly, then looked disapprovingly at her daughter who sat silently toying with her food.

“And what do you plan to do here in Sri Lanka?” she asked him.

“Sun-bathe. And swim. And relax. And I hope to visit the ruined cities— you know, Polonnaruwa and Anuradhapura. And I plan to see the frescoes at Sigiriya too. Pretty hot though, I hear. But very interesting.”

Mrs. Simpson-Kerr put down her knife and fork. She had disposed of
the pineapple. "But how very strange..." she gasped. "That is exactly what we plan to do. Can't we go together? And you would know so very much about it all—really, it would be most instructive for us..."

Dr. Soames turned to Margaret who had again reddened with embarrassment. "I can't imagine that you are interested in ruined cities," he said a trifle unkindly. "Are you?"

"Not much," she said. "But mother is. So I suppose I'll go along." Her eyes were dark grey and looked straight back at him.

*

Across the dining-room a German couple had arrived with their two children. Herr Professor Doktor Schwartz and family. His light brown hair stood up stiffly, and he wore a pair of rimless glasses. He adjusted the chair for his plump wife and said: "Also, Mammachen, now we are in Sri Lanka so one eats what is eaten in Sri Lanka. But—to be careful. Only boiled water to drink, or bottled drinks. Understood, children?" The fair little girl had two thin plaits. She nodded and watched her brother who was making faces at her across the table. And wondering whether Pappa would let him climb the big rock down by the sea, and help the fishermen with their fishing...

*

Roger Farr, the American film star, sat with a very pretty young girl. He was off to Australia for some location filming. His voice was a shade too loud and carried across the room: "... and then I went to New York; at that time I was still in the theatre, doing Shakespeare, Shaw, Anouilh. Terrific success. After that, London. A most appreciative audience. Fantastic." The young girl said: "I am sure it was wonderful," and fluttered her lashes. He
looked deep into her eyes. And thought, not much brain in that pretty head of hers, but what does it matter? And also-I wonder whether I can get her to sleep with me tonight....

*

Little Mary Stevens had finished her meal and was looking round the dining-room. The walls were painted white, the ceiling and partitions worked in an elaborate design of wood and cane. French windows overlooked a tiled verandah and the sea beat gently against the sandy shore below. Spiked fronds of coconut trees edged the sky. Mary's father said; "Tomorrow I am very busy, I have to go to the Ministry and finalize the deal. We only have to sign the agreement now. You be good, and look after youself, don't get sunburnt and don't go too far out into the sea. Right?"

Mary nodded. She adored her father. For one thing, he was very handsome, with his small, neatly trimmed moustache; it was difficult to determine, what made him so different. And so attractive. He and mother didn't live together. She hadn't fathomed why, but no doubt the reasons were good. It didn't really bother her. Father took her everywhere with him. Her schooling suffered of course, but he always said you learn much more by travelling... Secretly, Mary had her doubts but she would not have dreamt of airing them. Father had decided views. Anyway, she thought, tomorrow I shall have the whole morning to myself, and maybe I can get that young fisherman to row me out in one of those funny outrigger canoes... I wonder whether father would mind if he knew. She decided not to risk asking him.

* 

Podi Singho was sweating as he carried the empty dishes towards the
kitchen. He was tired. The tourist season was well and good, but there was a limit. He slammed down the tray, sat down on a wooden bench in the kitchen and unbuttoned the top button of his white jacket. He sighed. What a life. And the Sinhalese New Year only two days off. How he'd like to go home to the village to observe the traditions. He thought of his small cadjan-roofed house nesting against a hill, and the smell of the hot coconut oil with the cakes sizzling in the pan was sharp in his nostrils. His mouth watered. And he thought of his wife, Mary Nona. She would be sewing the New Year clothes for the children. He wondered what auspicious colour had been decreed for the festivities. Well, if she was to have money to buy the stuff for the children's clothes he'd have to carry on and serve these guzzling white foreigners with their pale eyes, skin and hair...

*  

Mrs. Simpson-Kerr got up from the table. She said: "I think I'll go and write some letters. You young people amuse yourselves... why don't you dance in the Night Club upstairs?"

Dr. Soames also rose. "Shall we?" he asked Margaret.

The Night Club was dimly lit, and weird masks in bright colours hung from the walls and ceiling. The dance floor, separated from the diners by a latticed partition, was even darker. The windows stood wide open to the sea and a golden moon hung over the horizon. A local singer accompanied by a guitarist crooned: ..."And I know I shall love you for ever..." His voice had a pleasant husky quality. Margaret relaxed as she danced with Dr. Soames, and a warm, long forgotten feeling welled up within her. I like him, she thought. I like him very much...

*
The German couple climbed heavily upstairs... Mrs. Schwartz took the children to their room while the Professor made for the bar to take a small liqueur with his coffee and cigar. His eyes wandered. Several Sinhalese girls in their elegant bright saris were chatting with their men, and what magnificent eyes and hair they have thought Professor Dr. Schwartz; and how dainty they are, with their small wrists and waists... It was warm, and he sweated slightly. He downed the last drop of the liqueur, sighed, and went up to their room. Mrs. Schwartz, already comfortably in bed, a novel in her hand and an open box of chocolates on the bedside table had wrapped her hair tightly in curlers which framed her face. She wore a pair of reading glasses perched at the end of her rather fleshy nose. He undressed silently and stretched out beside her, put out the light and reached over for her hand. She remembered to take off her glasses...

*

The roar of the waves breaking below met Roger Farr as he opened the door of his room. He let the girl walk in before him. He did not switch on the light but gently led her to the window. She murmured: "Isn't it beautiful?" and her voice trembled a little. He took her in his arms and kissed her while she thought this can't be true, it just cannot be true. And while she pictured her friends' faces when she told them, he deftly unbuttoned her frock. Awkwardly she stood there by the window, a golden young girl, while the Indian ocean pounded against the rock below. And her ardent lover lifted her and carried across the room to his bed...

*

In the morning Mary wasted no time. As soon as her father had left for
town she put on her bathing costume and skipped down the steps to the sand and the sea. It was not very hot yet, the sand still held the coolness of the night. She ran along the almost deserted beach to where she had seen the outriggers drawn up yesterday; but they were all gone, to fish she supposed. She was very disappointed. The sea looked calm so Mary decided to have a swim instead. Not too far out a small rock projected above the surface of the water; she began to swim towards it. With her thin young arms she struck out. Shoals of small fish passed her, darting in the crystal clear water, shadowed against the sand at the bottom of the sea. She swam and swam, thinking, I am going to swim to India, swim in this marvellous sea, and I'll marry a Maharajah and ride an elephant to my palace, and the garden will be full of gorgeous flowers, and the Maharajah will get down from the elephant and pick an... an orchid, and hand it to me, saying-what would he say? She swam on and on, born on the waves of her day-dreams. She was twelve years old.

* 

Roger Farr climbed into the Airline bus. His night's companion was standing forlornly on the steps of the hotel, waving. She looked tired... he waved back desultorily, then turned to stow his small luggage. The bus moved off. The girl stood and shaded her eyes against the sun, the bus turned a corner and was gone.

* 

In the Dining Room they were cleaning and changing the table-cloths. Podi Singho couldn't stand it any longer: I must go home, somehow I must go. Pulling down the corners of his lips and frowning he staggered up to the
stewart. He said: "Mahatmaya, I am not well, I cannot work today." The stewart was fully aware of the imminence of the New Year. He said: "Not well? Then you better go home Podi Singho, but come back soon." Podi Singho's face lit up. "Oh yes, Mahatmaya, very soon." His illness forgotten he ran to his quarters, threw some clothes into his battered old suitcase and started off down the road, humming.

* 

Margaret Simpson-Kerr woke up feeling marvellous. She lay in her bed idly watching the sun's rays creep across the carpeted floor, and remembered the previous night. They had danced till very late, dancing, floating in his arms... She curled up with the pleasure of it. He had brought her to her room, quietly they had walked the dim corridors, and... and he had thanked her, kissed her hand. So charming and... delicate. And I shall see him in the morning, and he will smile his slow smile, and the day... days, weeks, months, will be before us. I am in love, she thought, I am in love and all the world is wonderful...

She got up and smiled at her image in the mirror. She went down to breakfast. The sun was so bright, the terrace scrubbed clean, and the sea sparkled. The sand stretched virgin and smooth under a pale blue sky. I am in love, her heart sang, I am really and truly in love... After breakfast she wandered around, browsing in the book-shop and admiring the jewels displayed in the show-cases. On an impulse she bought a tie-pin, a slim gold sword set with a blood-red ruby. She put it in her pocket and pictured herself pinning it onto his tie. She collected Mother for lunch. Dr. Soames had not yet come down, said the waiter. The air was heavy now, the sun hot. From the plants in the rockery a rich sweet fragrance drifted up. And Margaret thought soon it will be evening, and we will dance again and maybe we will
go for a walk, and he will kiss me under the palms; and there will be a moon. She lay in her bed in the afternoon heat and drifted off to sleep.

It was getting dark when she woke. She dressed with care and with a pounding heart left her room. The hotel was full of people, a new contingent of guests had arrived. She mingled with them, listening to their talk, the different languages and accents. Suddenly she stopped dead. Peter Soames was standing at the Reception Desk talking animatedly to a beautiful girl. He saw her and smiled. "Hello, Margaret," he called to her, waving excitedly. "Come and meet my fiancee, she has just arrived. Phew, what a crowd, and isn't it stifling?"

Margaret walked over and shook the girl's hand. She couldn't think of anything to say, in any case they were busy with each other, were hardly aware of her. They didn't even notice when she turned and walked out of the large glass swing doors, over the drive and down the pebbly path between the rockery. Down to the sandy beach.

She stood under the palmtrees and listened to the breakers pounding on the rocks. The sky was full of stars; and there was a moon.

*****

Appendix II

Creation

'Ere God created the Heaven and the Earth
Chaos abode among the void and shapeless masses.
Darkness prevailed; perplexity, confusion
Spread to all hidden, dark recesses.
But God created Light in His great mirth,
And Light revealed the chaos and disorder.
So God thought He'd make fertile and enrich
Those devastated plains of rock and stone.
An Interview with Anne Ranasinghe on Aspects of Culture in Sri Lanka

For six whole days He toiled unceasingly,
But on the seventh day He rested on His throne,
To gaze upon that blissful, happy world
Which he created, and which He had hurled
Out of the space to its appointed place.
And God saw everything that He had made,
And saw fertility arise from consternation.
Then God, He smiled at this, this glorious creation,
For, oh, behold, He saw that it was good.

Ann Katz
(aged 15)
Women's Outlook
July 5, 1941